

The Human Stain

From Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia

The Human Stain (2000) is a novel by Philip Roth set in late 1990s rural New England. Its first person narrator is 65-year-old author Nathan Zuckerman, who appeared in several earlier Roth novels, and who also figures in both *American Pastoral* (1997) and *I Married a Communist* (1998), two books that form a loose trilogy with *The Human Stain*.^[1] Zuckerman acts largely as an observer rather than the protagonist of the novel, who is Coleman Silk, a retired professor of classics whose complex story is slowly revealed.

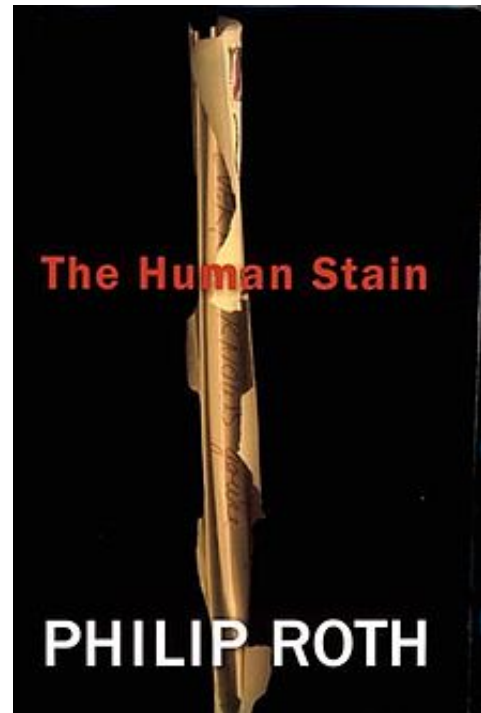
A national bestseller, *The Human Stain* was adapted as a film by the same name directed by Robert Benton. Released in 2003, the film starred Anthony Hopkins, Nicole Kidman, and Gary Sinise.

Contents

- 1 Synopsis
- 2 Background
- 3 Critical response
 - 3.1 Themes
 - 3.2 Anatole Broyard controversy
- 4 Reception
- 5 Awards
 - 5.1 Winner
 - 5.2 Finalist
- 6 Adaptations
- 7 References
- 8 Sources
- 9 Further reading
- 10 External links

Synopsis

The Human Stain



First edition cover

Author	Philip Roth
Cover artist	Michaela Sullivan
Country	United States
Language	English
Publisher	Houghton Mifflin
Publication date	May 2000
Media type	Print (Hardback & Paperback)
Pages	352 pp
ISBN	0-618-05945-8
OCLC	43109968 (https://www.worldcat.org/oclc/43109968)
Dewey Decimal	813/.54 21
LC Class	PS3568.O855 H8 2000

The story is told by Nathan Zuckerman, a writer who lives quietly in New England, where Coleman Silk is his neighbor. Silk is a former professor and dean of faculty at nearby Athena College, a fictional institution in the Berkshires of western Massachusetts. Silk is accused of racism by two African American students. The uproar leads to Silk's resignation. Soon after, his wife Iris dies of a stroke, which Silk feels is caused by the stress of his being forced out of the college. Silk begins a relationship with Faunia Farley, a 34-year-old local woman who works as a janitor at the college and is illiterate. Silk is criticized by feminist scholars at the college for this.

It is slowly revealed through Zuckerman's musings that Silk is an African American who has been "passing" as Jewish (and white) since a stint in the Navy. He completed graduate school, married a white woman and had four children with her. He never told his wife and children of his African American ancestry. As Roth wrote in the novel, Silk chose "to take the future into his own hands rather than to leave it to an unenlightened society to determine his fate".^[2]

Background

The Human Stain is set in 1998 in the United States, during the period of President Bill Clinton's impeachment hearings and scandal over Monica Lewinsky. It is the third of Roth's postwar novels that take on large social themes.^[2]

In 2010, cultural critic Touré had noted the similarity between Silk and the life of Anatole Broyard, writing, "Broyard, the great literary critic of *The New York Times* in the 1970s and '80s, was probably the inspiration for Coleman Silk. He was born black in New Orleans but passed as white in New York. Even as he was dying, with his wife urging him to reveal his secret to his children, he refused to tell them he was black."^[3]

Roth did not comment on such suggestions until 2012, when he wrote publicly that he was only vaguely acquainted with Anatole Broyard during his lifetime, and Broyard was not the inspiration for the novel. The novel was actually inspired by an event in the life of his friend Melvin Tumin, a "professor of sociology at Princeton for some thirty years." According to Roth, Tumin was subject to a "witch hunt" but was ultimately found blameless in a matter involving use of allegedly racial language concerning two African American students.^[4]

Critical response

Themes

The Human Stain is the third in a trilogy, following *American Pastoral* and *I Married a Communist*, in which Roth explores American morality and its effects. Here he examines the cut-throat and, at times, petty, atmosphere in American academia, in which "political correctness" was upheld.^[5] Roth said he wrote the trilogy to reflect periods in the 20th century—the McCarthy years, the Vietnam War, and President Bill Clinton's impeachment—that he thinks are the "historical moments in post-war American life that have had the greatest impact on my generation."^[6]

The journalist Michiko Kakutani said that, in *The Human Stain*, Roth explores issues of identity and self-invention in America which he had long explored in earlier works. She wrote the following interpretation:

It is a book that shows how the public Zeitgeist can shape, even destroy, an individual's life, a book that takes all of Roth's favorite themes of identity and rebellion and generational strife and refracts them not through the narrow prism of the self but through a wide-angle lens that exposes the fissures and discontinuities of 20th-century life. ... When stripped of its racial overtones, Roth's book echoes a story he has told in novel after novel. Indeed, it closely parallels the story of Nathan Zuckerman, himself another dutiful, middle-class boy from New Jersey who rebelled against his family and found himself exiled, 'unbound' as it were, from his roots."^[2]

Mark Shechner writes in his 2003 study that in the novel, Roth explores issues in American society that force a man such as Silk to hide his background, to the point of not having a personal history to share with his children or family. He wanted to pursue an independent course unbounded by racial restraints, but became what he once despised. His downfall to some extent is engineered by Delphine Roux, the young, female, elite, French intellectual who is dismayed to find herself in a New England outpost of sorts, and sees Silk as having become deadwood in academia, the very thing he abhorred at the beginning of his own career.^[7]

Anatole Broyard controversy

In the reviews of the book in both the daily and the Sunday *New York Times* in 2000, Kakutani and Lorrie Moore connected the central character of Coleman Silk to the life of Anatole Broyard, a well-known New York literary editor of the *Times*.^{[2][8]} Other writers in the academic and mainstream press made the same suggestion.^{[9][10][11][12][13][14]} After Broyard's death in 1990, it had been revealed that he racially passed during his many years employed as a critic at *The New York Times*.^[15] He was of Louisiana Creole ancestry.

In 2008, Roth stated in an interview that he had not known of Broyard's ancestry when he started writing the book and had only learned of it months later.^[16] On September 7, 2012, Roth wrote an open letter to Wikipedia in *The New Yorker* in which he dismissed critics' earlier suggestions that his novel was inspired by Anatole Broyard.^[4] He said that he had used an incident in the life of his friend Melvin Tumin, professor of sociology at Princeton, and created everything else about his character, Coleman Silk. Roth used details from Tumin's experience in the events that led to Silk's resigning from the college.^[4] Roth acknowledged that he had met Broyard and had heard a rumor about his ancestry but wrote that he barely knew him.^[4] Bliss Broyard, the daughter of Anatole Broyard, responded on her Facebook page, "I think it's completely reasonable that Roth should be allowed to have the last word on who inspires his characters. . . BUT I don't think it's reasonable that Roth gets to dictate what conclusions other people draw about his characters."^[17] The Facebook posting was republished on Salon.com by Prachi Gupta with the heading, "Does Philip Roth know what inspired his novel?"^[17]

Reception

The novel was well received, became a national bestseller, and won numerous awards. In choosing it for its "Editors' Choice" list of 2000, *The New York Times* wrote:

When Zuckerman and Silk are together and testing each other, Roth's writing reaches an emotional intensity and a vividness not exceeded in any of his books. The American dream of starting over entirely new has the force of inevitability here, and Roth's judgment clearly is that you can never make it all the way. There is no comfort in this vision, but the tranquility Zuckerman achieves as he tells the story is infectious, and that is a certain reward.^[18]

In April of 2013, GQ listed *The Human Stain* as the second best book of the 21st century.^[19]

Awards

Winner

- *New York Times* "Editors' Choice" (2000)^[18]
- Koret Jewish Book Award (2000)^[20]
- *Chicago Tribune* Editor's Pick (2000)^[20]
- WH Smith Literary Award (2001)^[20]
- National Jewish Book Award (2001)^[20]
- PEN/Faulkner Award for Fiction (2001)^[21]
- Prix Médicis étranger; Meilleur livre de l'année 2002

Finalist

- *Los Angeles Times* Book Prize for fiction (2000).^[22]
- L.L. Winship/PEN New England Award (2001)^[20]

Adaptations

- It was adapted as 2003 a film by the same name, directed by Robert Benton and starring Anthony Hopkins and Nicole Kidman.

References

1. Taylor, Charles (April 24, 2000). "Life and life only" (<http://archive.salon.com/books/feature/2000/04/24/roth/index.html>). *Salon*. Retrieved September 9, 2012.
2. Michiko Kakutani (May 2, 2000). "Confronting the Failures of a Professor Who Passes" (<http://www.nytimes.com/library/books/050200roth-book-review.html>). *The New York Times*. Retrieved September 8, 2012.
3. <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/02/21/books/review/Toure-t.html>
4. Philip Roth (September 7, 2012). "An Open Letter to Wikipedia" (<http://www.newyorker.com/online/blogs/books/2012/09/an-open-letter-to-wikipedia.html>). *The New Yorker*.

- Retrieved October 20, 2012.
5. Shechner (2003), 187
 6. Safer (2003), 239
 7. Shechner (2003), 186–195
 8. Lorrie Moore, "The Wrath of Athena" (<http://www.nytimes.com/books/00/05/07/reviews/000507.07mooret.html>), *New York Times*, May 7, 2000, accessed August 20, 2012. Quote: "In addition to the hypnotic creation of Coleman Silk – whom many readers will feel, correctly or not, to be partly inspired by the late Anatole Broyard – Roth has brought Nathan Zuckerman into old age, continuing what he began in *American Pastoral*."
 9. Tierney, William G. (2002). "Interpreting Academic Identities: Reality and Fiction on Campus", *The Journal of Higher Education*, Vol. 73, No. 1, Special Issue: The Faculty in the New Millennium (Jan. – Feb., 2002), pp. 161–172
 10. Brent Staples, "Editorial Observer; Back When Skin Color Was Destiny, Unless You Passed for White" (<http://www.nytimes.com/2003/09/07/opinion/07SUN3.html?pagewanted=print&position=#top>), *New York Times*, September 7, 2003, accessed January 25, 2011. Quote: "This was raw meat for Philip Roth, who may have known the outlines of the story even before Henry Louis Gates Jr. told it in detail in 'The New Yorker' in 1996. When Mr. Roth's novel about "passing" – *The Human Stain* – appeared in 2000, the character who jettisons his black family to live as white was strongly reminiscent of Mr. Broyard."
 11. Sarris, Andrew (November 3, 2003). "Cinematic Stain Stirs My Soul: Coleman Silk, I Feel Your Pain" (<http://www.highbeam.com/doc/1G1-109503199.html>). *The New York Observer*. Retrieved September 13, 2012. "my professional debt to the late Anatole Broyard, the 'passer' and Times book reviewer on whom Mr. Roth's Coleman Silk is partly based." (subscription required)
 12. Patricia J. Williams (October 27, 2003). "Rush Limbaugh's inner black child (The Human Stain, movie adaptation of book by Philip Roth)" (<http://www.highbeam.com/doc/1G1-108993849.html>). *The Nation*. Retrieved September 13, 2012. "Philip Roth's novel *The Human Stain* attracted considerable attention some years back; it was widely read as a fictionalized version of literary critic Anatole Broyard's life. Broyard, an editor at *The New York Times Book Review*, was a light-skinned black man who decided early in his career to 'pass'; he cut ties with his family and lived his life as a white man." (subscription required)
 13. Kaplan, Brett Ashley (2005). "Anatole Broyard's *Human Stain*: Performing Postracial Consciousness." *Philip Roth Studies*, 1.2 (2005): 125–44
 14. Boddy, Kasia (2010). *Philip Roth's Great Books: A Reading of The Human Stain*. *Cambridge Quarterly* (2010) 39 (1): 39–60. doi: 10.1093/camqtly/bfp025
 15. Shechner (2003), 186
 16. Robert Hilferty (September 16, 2008). "Philip Roth Serves Up Blood and Guts in 'Indignation' (Update1)" (<http://www.bloomberg.com/apps/news?pid=newsarchive&sid=aw9u2ESpnFN0&refer=muse>). Bloomberg. "I knew Anatole slightly, and I didn't know he was black. Eventually there was a *New Yorker* article describing Anatole's life written months and months after I had begun my book."
 17. Prachi Gupta (September 19, 2012). "Does Philip Roth know what inspired his novel?" (http://www.salon.com/2012/09/19/philp_roth_doesnt_get_last_word_on_what_inspired_his_novel/). *Salon*.
 18. Staff writer (December 3, 2000). "Editors' Choice: The 10 best books of 2000" (<http://www.nytimes.com/books/00/12/03/reviews/001203.03editort.html>). *The New York Times*. Retrieved September 9, 2012.

19. November 2014 "The New Yorker: The 21 Books from the 21st Century Every Man Should Read"

19. NOVEMBER 2014 "The New Canon: The 21 Books from the 21st Century Every Man Should Read" (<http://www.gq.com/entertainment/books/201304/21-books-for-the-21st-century>). *GQ*. April 8, 2013.
20. "The Human Stain: Awards" (<http://www.houghtonmifflinbooks.com/catalog/titledetail.cfm?textType=awards&titleNumber=682684>). Houghton Mifflin. Retrieved 2008-03-28. "This complex novel about 'dissembling and impersonation is the work of a remarkable creative intelligence,' added Alvin H. Rosen."
21. PEN/Faulkner Award for Fiction: Winners 1996–2006 (<http://www.penfaulkner.org/affWinners02.htm>)
22. LA Times Book Awards (http://www.latimes.com/extras/festivalofbooks/newsreleases/print_2001_06.html), *Los Angeles Times*, press release, June 2001

Sources

- Safer, Elaine B. "Tragedy and Farce in Roth's the Human Stain". in Bloom, Harold (ed.) *Philip Roth*. Chelsea House. ISBN 0–7910–7446–3
- Shechner, Mark (2003). *Up Society's Ass, Copper: Rereading Philip Roth*. University of Wisconsin Press, ISBN 9780299193546

Further reading

- Boddy, Kasia (2010). "Philip Roth's Great Books: A Reading of The Human Stain". *Cambridge Quarterly* (2010) 39 (1): 39–60. doi: 10.1093/camqtly/bfp025
- Faisst, Julia (2006). "Delusionary Thinking, Whether White or Black or in Between: Fictions of Race in Philip Roth's *The Human Stain*". *Philip Roth Studies*, 2006
- Kaplan, Brett Ashley (2005). "Anatole Broyard's Human Stain: Performing Postracial Consciousness." *Philip Roth Studies*, 1.2 (2005): 125–44.
- Moynihan, Sinéad (2010). *Passing into the Present: Contemporary American Fiction of Racial and Gender Passing*. Manchester University Press, ISBN 978-0719082290
- Tierney, William G. (2002). "Interpreting Academic Identities: Reality and Fiction on Campus". *The Journal of Higher Education*, Vol. 73, No. 1, Special Issue: The Faculty in the New Millennium (Jan. – Feb., 2002), pp. 161–172

External links

- *The Human Stain* at Random House's Reading Group Center page (<http://www.randomhouse.com/vintage/read/humanstain/>)
- Awards: *The Human Stain* (<http://www.houghtonmifflinbooks.com/catalog/titledetail.cfm?textType=awards&titleNumber=682684>), Houghton Mifflin
- "Philip Roth's open letter to Wikipedia" – Sept 7, 2012 (<http://www.newyorker.com/online/blogs/books/2012/09/an-open-letter-to-wikipedia.html>), *New*

Yorker Blog 'Page Turner'

Retrieved from "http://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=The_Human_Stain&oldid=646495114"

Categories: 2000 novels | Novels by Philip Roth | American novels adapted into films
| Houghton Mifflin books

- This page was last modified on 10 February 2015, at 13:20.
- Text is available under the Creative Commons Attribution-ShareAlike License; additional terms may apply. By using this site, you agree to the Terms of Use and Privacy Policy. Wikipedia® is a registered trademark of the Wikimedia Foundation, Inc., a non-profit organization.